

Retracing the Route of Cortés:
How the Conquest Has Shaped Mexico's Past and Present

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Retracing the Route of Cortés: How the Conquest Has Shaped Mexico's Past and Present

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Douglas Barnette', with a large, stylized loop in the middle.

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Abstract

When Hernán Cortés arrived to the American mainland in 1519, he was looking for gold and power in the New World. After hearing about a large indigenous city, he set off for the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, setting into motion one of the most significant events in the history of the Americas.

By August of 1521, Cortés and his men had successfully conquered the Aztecs. This great power shift affected the Americas profoundly, but in what ways? The establishment of New Spain, and later Mexico, as well the fusion of two peoples and cultures, created a new race of man and had numerous other outcomes. How did the conquest affect Mexico's past and present?

In order to investigate this topic, I studied the historical events, retraced the route of Cortés, and drew from my past experiences living and traveling in Mexico. I also tried to integrate my interests—such as international business, economics, Spanish, and Latin American culture—to approach these questions in a multidisciplinary manner.

Through my studies, travels, and experiences, I learned that Mexico is a culturally-rich place, with a history that seems as though it were a script for an action movie or soap opera. Never boring, Mexico owes many of the aspects of its intrigue to the conquest, and more specifically, to Hernán Cortés's successful invasion of Tenochtitlán.

Acknowledgements

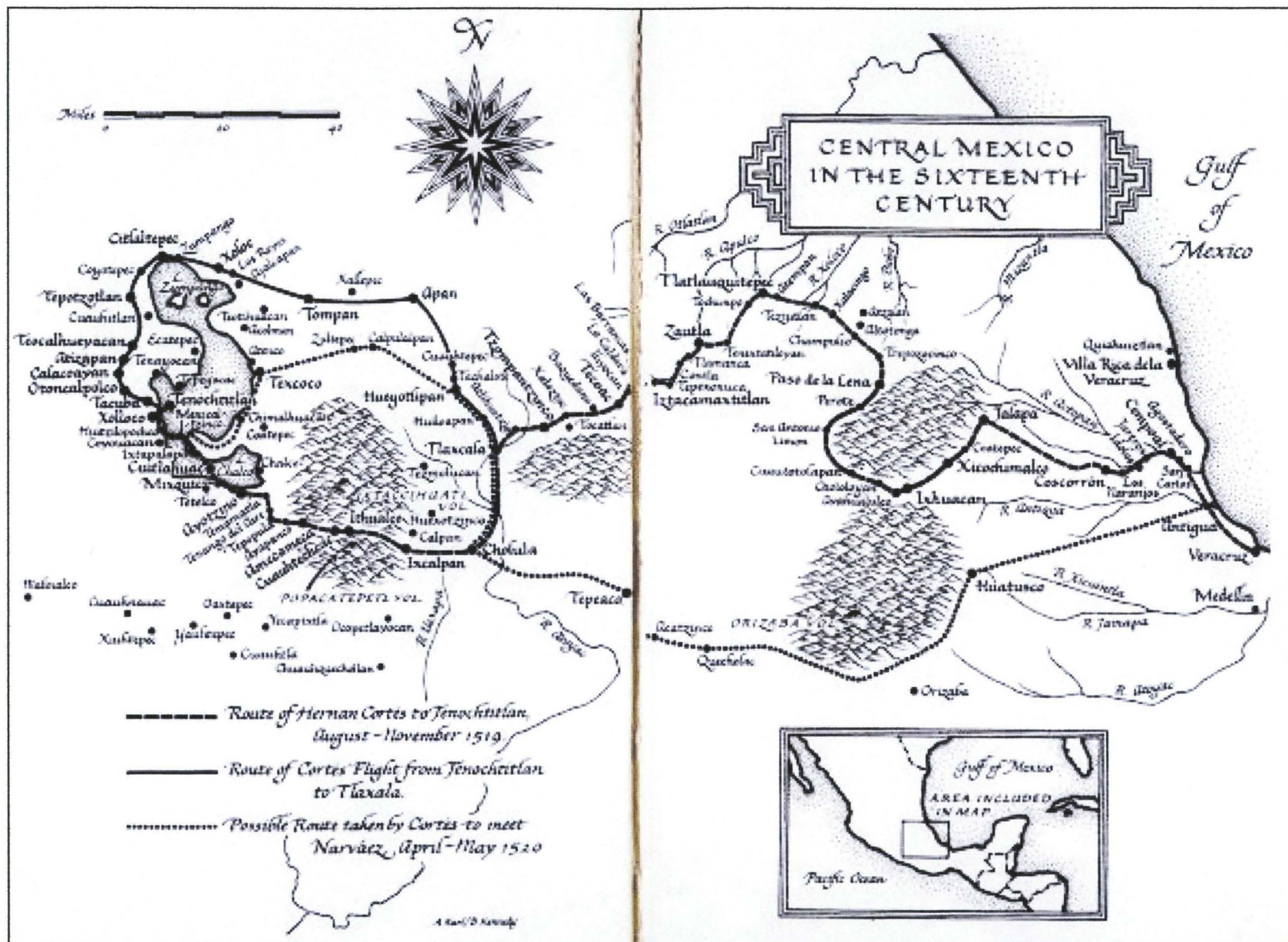
-I want to thank Dr. Douglas Barnette for being my advisor for this project. Through his classes, he has helped me develop interests that inspired me to complete this project. He was also a great resource throughout the entire process.

-I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Ranieri and Mr. Iván David Martínez for their support throughout my undergraduate career at Ball State University.

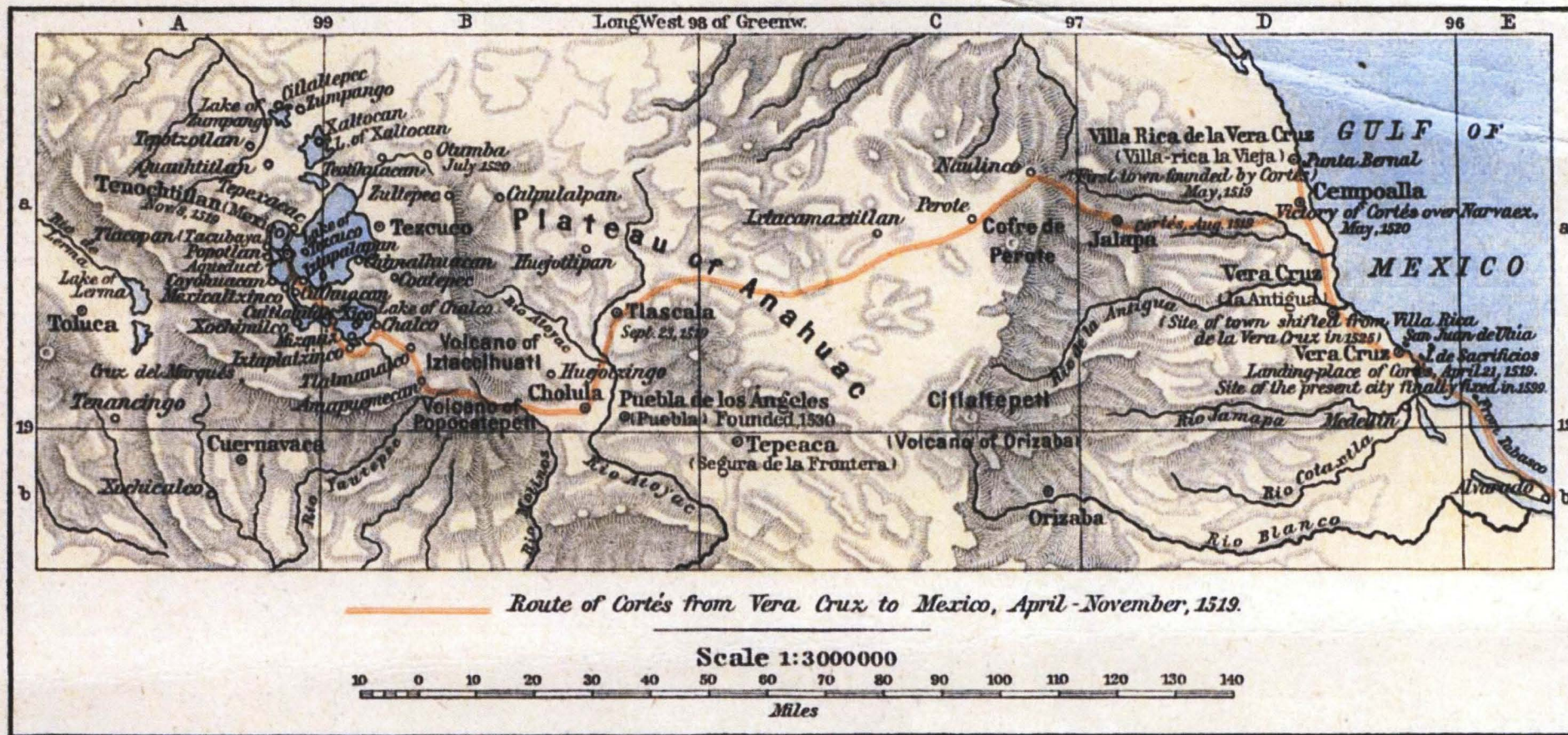
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Maps of the Route



("Cortes' Routes to and from Mexico")



("Route of Cortes from Vera Cruz to Mexico, April–November 1519")



("Conquest of Mexico 1519-1521")

Historical Backgrounds

During the traveling portion of the project, I visited 16 sites that were either part of the route of Cortés or closely related to his journey. These places included the following: Veracruz, La Antigua, Villa Rica, San Juan de Ulúa, Zempoala, Quiahuiztlan, Xalapa, Xicochimalco, Coatepec, Perote, Tlaxcala, Cholula, Puebla, Paso de Cortés, Amecameca, and Tenochtitlán (Mexico City). Of that list, five sites played crucial roles in the conquest, while the others were simply points through which Cortés and his men passed on their way to the Aztec capital. For that reason, brief historical backgrounds will be provided for those five places, which helped define the conquest of Mexico.

La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz

La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (Rich Village of the True Cross) was the first permanent Spanish settlement in the American mainland. In 1519, Hernán Cortés and his men arrived for a gold-searching expedition, and founded the town. The location of Veracruz, as it is known today, was moved twice, but it always served as the main port city of New Spain. It was the starting point of the conquest of Mexico, and, for that reason, is one of the most significant on the route of Cortés (Meyer and Sherman 95-113).

Zempoala

Zempoala was the first large indigenous settlement encountered by Cortés. It was the largest city in the Gulf Coast region, with an estimated population of 20,000 to 30,000. The city was vital to the success of the conquest of Mexico, as Cortés was able to establish a strong alliance with the Totonac people, who had been suppressed by the Aztecs. Soldiers from

Zempoala helped the Spanish gain an alliance with the Tlaxcalans, and accompanied Cortés all the way to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán (Meyer and Sherman 104-9).

Tlaxcala

Tlaxcala proved to be perhaps the most important site on the route of Cortés. After fighting initially, the Spanish and Tlaxcalans became allies. The Tlaxcalan warriors were essential to the Spanish defeat of the Aztecs, as they were highly-skilled in the battlefield. Tlaxcala also served as a safe refuge for Cortés and his men when they had to retreat after taking substantial losses during *La noche triste* in Tenochtitlán. The Spanish were able to regroup in Tlaxcala, and with the help of their native allies, they were able to defeat the Aztecs (Meyer and Sherman 107).

Cholula

At the time of the arrival of the Spanish, Cholula was a greatly important religious capital. It was second only to Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital. The city had a population estimated at 70,000 to 100,000—with nearly 400 temples, including the Great Pyramid of Cholula. In 1519, Hernán Cortés and his men slaughtered thousands of unarmed Cholulans. The massacre of Cholula—as it is called today—may have been a premeditated attempt to frighten Moctezuma, who was awaiting the Spaniards in Tenochtitán. This, however, is a highly-disputed topic, as some say that Cortés acted to prevent an inevitable ambush. Either way, Cholula marks the first large incident of violence between the Spanish and native peoples (Benitez 179-204).

Tenochtitlán

Tenochtitlán was the reason for the conquest of Mexico. Having heard of a large, rich city to the West, Cortés decided to undertake his journey. At the time of Cortés's arrival, the Aztec capital had a population estimated at 200,000 to 300,000. It was thought to have rivaled European cities of that time, in terms of size and infrastructure. It was from this great city that Moctezuma, the leader of the Aztec people, governed and suppressed various indigenous groups.

On November 8, 1519, Cortés and his men arrived to the Aztec capital, where they were allowed to enter freely. Soon after, Cortés took Moctezuma hostage, and the Spanish attempted to take the city. During this time, Cortés was forced to leave the city to address a Spanish expedition that had been sent after him, since his expedition was conducted against the orders of Velázquez, his commanding officer. After defeating the expedition, he convinced his former Spanish foes to join him in taking the Aztec capital.

During Cortés's absence, the Spanish attacked and killed hundreds of Aztec nobles, which resulted in major retaliation. When Cortés returned, he was again allowed to enter the city freely, this time with a larger force of nearly 1,000 men. After reuniting with the Spanish force that had remained, Cortés and his men were relentlessly attacked by the Aztecs. During this night, which is known as *La Noche Triste* (The Sad Night), Moctezuma was accidentally killed by his own people, and the Spanish were ambushed. Nearly half of the Spanish force was killed as it retreated to Tlaxcalan territory.

After regrouping in Tlaxcala, Cortés and his men—now reinforced by a large group of Tlaxcalans—returned to Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs, now certain that Cortés and his men were mortal, geared up for full out war. The new attitude toward the Spaniards came too late, though, as the city experienced a smallpox epidemic, which killed off tens of thousands of natives, leaving the city nearly defenseless. Cortés and his men laid siege on Tenochtitlán in December of 1520, and set up headquarters there. After fighting with the decimated Aztec population for several months, Tenochtitlán fell to Cortés on August 13, 1521, marking one of the most significant events in the history of the Americas (Meyer and Sherman 115-129).

Travel Journal

12/30-31/2010

My attempt to retrace the route of Hernán Cortés began in the morning, as I left a hole-in-the-wall bus station in San Antonio, Texas. I had purchased bus tickets from San Antonio to Monterrey, Monterrey to Tampico, and Tampico to Veracruz. Bus travel was so much cheaper than flying—even if it meant being uncomfortable for an entire day—that I felt I had no other choice. My only fear was that I would miss a bus, or that the schedules would change—leaving me with two or three bus tickets that were no longer of any value. Bus travel is cheap as long as you are lucky and plan well. Otherwise, you end up having to buy two sets of tickets for yourself.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico border on a bus is always an interesting experience, and I was one of the only foreigners on the bus, so I had to get off to fill out a visa. I arrived in Monterrey without any problems. It seemed like I had never been there before, even though I had lived there for six months and recognized the city's landmarks. I left Monterrey an hour later for Tampico. That bus ride was a bit more stressful. For reasons still unknown to me, the driver decided to stop the bus three or four times during our trip. One of the stops was at an OXXO, a Mexican chain of convenience shops similar to 7-11s, where he bought a candy bar and a bottle of Coke. I was not against the idea of a hungry driver stopping, but each stop was taking close to 15 minutes, which set us back an hour. Because of the frequent snack stops, the ticket that I held in my hand when we arrived to Tampico had to be changed. My bus had already left, and I feared that I was going to have to spend several hours—it was already 1:30a.m.—in the Tampico bus station. Luckily, I spoke with an employee who was able to change my ticket for a

bus that was to leave just before 2a.m., so I had worried myself over nothing. The final leg of my bus tour of Mexico went much more smoothly. I was already exhausted, so I slept nearly the entire time on the bus. Finally, after 26 hours of bus travel, I arrived in Veracruz around 12p.m. on New Year's Eve.

Doria, a friend from *El Tecnológico de Monterrey*—the university where I had done a six-month exchange two years previously—picked me up at the bus station and took me to her parents' house. It did not take me long to remember that Doria talks fast. She even said so, but did not seem to realize that it made it difficult for me to understand her—especially since my Spanish was a little rusty. The house was very small, but nice, and there were several openings to the outside without screens, so there were mosquitoes. It was warm and humid, nothing like the blizzard that I drove through on the way to San Antonio. I decided to see the city without resting, since I had slept on the bus. Doria had mentioned to me that she was not a good tour guide, but she said that she had done some research—which I had also done—so I figured everything would go well. My confidence was shaken a bit when we left her house. I, being the foreign tourist, assumed that she would be driving us around, but she did not have a license. Driving in Mexico is similar to driving go-carts or bumper cars at a carnival. In order to drive there safely, one must pretty much forget all traffic laws and regulations used in the States. I decided that driving in Veracruz would be a fun experience, so I took the keys and headed out.

We first tried to go to San Juan de Úlva, but it had closed at 1, so we were too late for that day. We then went to La Antigua, which lies a little to the north of Veracruz. We arrived to a small, old town with stone-paved roads. The main tourist draw was *La Casa de Cortés* (House

of Cortés), but other interesting sites were *La Ermita del Rosario*, *el Río La Antigua*, an old suspension bridge, and several interesting *ceiba* trees. La Antigua was interesting and I am glad that I was able to go.

On the way back, we drove along the *Malecón*, or boardwalk, which was very nice. Veracruz is a port city, and there is a lot of industrial shipping conducted there. A light house and two islands lie near the shore, so the city's horizon shows the clash of new and old. The winds in Veracruz, which are called *nortes*, were extremely strong, and the air was humid. After a shower and a short nap, New Year's dinner was served at midnight. I ate pasta and fresh shrimp, some lamb, and salted fish called *bacalao*. Dinner was good, and I was able to understand her parents, who spoke much more slowly than she did. I found out that her dad works for PEMEX—the national oil company in Mexico—and we talked about that for a while. I felt refreshed after showering, napping, and eating, so we decided to go to the *Malecón* to watch the fireworks and other festivities.

Driving to the boardwalk was a crazy experience. The roads were basically shutdown by traffic, but we managed to park about a block from the ocean. Our "parking spot" was actually in the left lane of a main road, but Doria told me that it did not matter. There had been threats—or rumors of threats—from the drug cartels, so the police and army were patrolling. I guess parking violations were the least of their worries as they drove around in turret-equipped Humvees. As we parked, the fireworks began, setting off dozens of car alarms simultaneously. The mixture of fireworks, cheers, car alarms, and police lights resulted in an environment resembling complete chaos. New Year's in Veracruz was much different than any that I had

experience. The weather and beach allowed for festivities that I more closely associated with Independence Day, Memorial Day, or possibly even tailgating before a college football game. A singing and dancing group from Cuba was on the main stage, so the chaos had a Caribbean soundtrack. Masses of people were drinking, dancing, and celebrating. We walked around for several hours enjoying the giant party.

1/1/2010

I woke up around 11a.m., quickly got ready, and then we went to a local mall. Doria's parents and nephew went to eat there, so we dropped them off and then took the car. We stopped by the ocean to take a picture of the lighthouse on the *Isla de Sacrificios*. The *nortes* were unbelievably strong, and the sand was flying. The combination of wind, water, and sand left us looking like we had a bad encounter with a large box of Shake 'n Bake. After retreating to the cover of the car, we went to San Juan de Ulúa. We spent three or four hours there, partly because Doria was fascinated by it as an architect, but also because it was huge and full of interesting items. The clash of times was clear, because the old fort lies next to Veracruz's modern shipping industry. Afterwards, we looked for a place to eat, but ended up eating at the house instead. I talked with her dad, who clearly hates anything/everything American, but it was still interesting to talk to him. He had been drinking brandy, so the conversation became more and more interesting. We talked about corruption in Mexico, how America is hated by the rest of the world, and the Nazis—an unusual range of topics. After about an hour, Doria interrupted and said that we should go see a movie. I suppose that meant that the conversation was about to take a downhill turn, but I really did enjoy talking with her dad. We went to the

mall, and the next showing of the movie was three hours later, which further confirmed that Doria really just wanted me to stop talking to her dad. We walked around the mall and talked a lot. My Spanish finally started kicking back into gear, and it was good to catch up on things with Doria. The movie was in English with Spanish subtitles—as most in Mexico are—even though very few people speak English there. It was a good, relaxing end to an eventful day.

1/2/2010

After getting a good feel for Veracruz, I decided to move on to Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz. Doria had family living there, so she went along to visit. Before leaving, we ate a big breakfast of *tamales*, *chorizo*, ribs, and juice at Doria's house. There was a lot of traffic on the way there, but that seems to be the norm. Doria's cousins picked us up and took us to their apartment. Then, with her aunt, we went to Xicochimalco and Coatepec, two small villages on the route to Tenochtitlán. After seeing all that there was to see—which was not too much—we returned to Xalapa and walked around the downtown area. We were going to return to Veracruz that night, but ended up staying at her aunt's apartment. I am not sure why our plans changed, but it was decided that we would meet up with Doria's parents in the morning at Villa Condell, and then we would go to Zempoala—one of the most important points on the route. I did not end up seeing much of Xalapa itself, but having access to a car and seeing the two smaller villages was great. I decided that I would go back to Xalapa for at least one full day to explore the city.

1/3/2010

Sleeping on a small couch probably was not the best idea. I woke up stiff, but we ate really good *tortas* for breakfast, so I guess that made up for the poor sleep. We then took a bus to Villa Condal to meet up with Doria's family. From there, we went to Zempoala to see the ruins. The site had a small museum and well-preserved ruins of pyramids. I wandered around the area with my travel guide at hand. The guide talked about the great view of the area from the top of the tallest pyramid, which now had a sign at its base that read "*no subir*" (do not climb). I asked Doria's dad if he thought it would be alright to climb it anyway. I asked him mainly for fear that he—motivated by anti-American sentiments—might call the local authorities in an attempt to have me arrested. Surprisingly, he said that it would be fine for me to climb the pyramid and take a picture, so I did. About three-quarters of the way up, an employee started whistling and waving his hand at me. Knowing that it would only take me another 15 seconds to reach the top, I waved back at him, turned, and continued climbing. By the time he walked over to the base of the pyramid, I had already taken some photos, and I was already on my way back down. I played the "confused foreigner" card, so he did not give me much grief. After seeing all there was to see at Zempoala, we decided to drive to Villa Rica and Quiahuixtlan.

The drive to Villa Rica was not long. We were in a hurry to get back to Veracruz, though, because Doria's dad and sister were leaving town that evening. Villa Rica did not really have any ruins from the time of Cortés, so we decided to spend our time at Quiahuixtlan. The ruins of the village are on the side of a small mountain, with a great view of the Gulf of Mexico. I felt as

though I was standing at the lookout point where the natives first saw the Spanish arrive by ship. I spent several minutes imagining what they must have seen, and I could have spent hours there, but we were on a short time schedule, so I did my best to soak up all that I could. Walking down the hillside on the way back to the car, I bought some fresh coconut, and talked with Doria about the significance of this site relating to my project. Although I felt rushed, I was grateful that Doria's family took the time to drive me out there. As we were leaving, a group of cattle and chickens blocked the road, which was pretty comical. We drove back to Veracruz, but the traffic was as bad as I had seen it, so it took us nearly two hours. When we arrived back to the house, we quickly ate a dinner of tacos—which were delicious—and then hurried to the bus station to see off Doria's dad and sister. Overall, it was one of the best days of my trip. I saw one of the most breathtaking sites that I have ever seen, and also managed to check off three major stops on the route.

1/4/2010

I woke early in the morning, grabbed a quick breakfast, and headed to the bus station. After thanking Doria and her mother for all of their hospitality, I boarded a bus headed back to Xalapa. The trip was once again prolonged by awful traffic, but I made use of the delay by reading up on what there was to see in the cultural capital of Veracruz. I had made a reservation at *Hostal de la Niebla* (Hostel of the Mist), which looked nice and cheap. After arriving at the bus station—with my huge backpack on—I walked a couple of blocks away from the station in order to avoid the inflated taxi fares. Xalapa is a hilly city, which makes walking an interesting experience. After a short walk, I got into a taxi—while it was slowly moving in

traffic—and told the driver where I was headed. There was a VIPS—which is much like a Cracker Barrel in the U.S.—next to the hostel, so I used that landmark instead of testing the driver's knowledge of the city. Traffic in Xalapa is constant, so it took a while to arrive. The hostel was exactly as it was shown on the website. I was traveling during a relatively slow time, so there was no one else in my 8-bunk room. After locking up my stuff, I decided to explore the city. The first thing I wanted to do was check out the city's museum of anthropology, which was supposed to be the second best in all of Mexico, only behind the one in Mexico City. I jumped in a cab and started talking to the driver, who had lived in Chicago for a couple of year. He said that the museum was great, and that it had a nice collection of Olmec statues. He dropped me off, and as I walked up to the gate, I realized that the museum doors were locked. There was no sign with the museum's operating hours, so I walked around to the other side of the building to see if there was another entrance. After nearly walking around the outside of the entire museum, I asked a passerby if he knew anything about the museum. He was a student at the local university, and I was happy to hear him say that the Museum was always open on Mondays. He led me back to the front door, realized that it was closed, and then remembered that it was closed for *Día de los Reyes*. I thanked him and headed back to the hostel.

After regrouping, I decided to explore the city on foot. The city center, cathedral, government buildings, and university were all within walking range, so I decided to check them all out, as I planned on leaving Xalapa the next morning. The city was beautiful. It lies between the high plateau and the coastal lands of Veracruz, so it has a unique climate, flora, and fauna. I saw everything that I wanted to see, and was completely exhausted from walking up and down the hills of the city. After checking the pedometer on my cell phone, I realized that I had walked

just under 13 miles. I was really glad that I had purchased some Dr. Scholls shoe inserts for the trip. I decided to take a quick nap in my still-empty room, and then I would go find some dinner.

It had begun to rain when I woke up from my nap, and it was about 45 degrees outside, which meant that my room was about 55 degrees—a bit cooler than I had planned for. I had a coat and some warm clothing, so I put it on and tried to find the nearest restaurant. I had remembered noticing a small taco place across from the cathedral, so I went there. The place was almost empty, so I did not have to wait at all to eat. I order some *tacos al pastor* and an Indio beer—which I had been craving for a long time since it is not sold at all in the States. News on a television inside the restaurant showed record snow fall in parts of the U.S., which made 45 degrees seem much better, but then I remember that the buildings at home were heated. The food was good, and, as a result, I ate more than I probably should have. That was one of the biggest mistakes I have ever made. The rain had turned into a foggy mist—hence the name of my hostel, *de la Niebla*—so I decided to walk around some more. The city had a strong bohemian vibe to it, with lots of coffee shops and artisan goods. I walked around for another two hours—since my nap had replenished my energy—and then headed back to my room, which was still empty.

1/5/2010

I woke up with an upset stomach, but I had brought plenty of medicine with me, so I was not going to let it mess up my plans. I took a warm shower, gathered up my stuff, and headed to the outdoor plaza for the complimentary breakfast. I was pouring a bowl of cereal

when two people walked in—the first guests I had seen. I introduced myself and ate breakfast with them. They were both college students—a girl from Germany and a guy from Mexico City—and they talked about going to the anthropology museum, so we decided to take a taxi together. I checked out of my room, left my backpack behind the front desk, and we headed out together. The museum had reopened, so that was a good start. The exhibits were great, and I was glad that I was able to visit before leaving Xalapa. About an hour into my visit, though, my stomach overpowered the medicine that I had taken. I literally had to sprint through the museum to the bathroom. As a 6'4" foreigner, people either found my sprinting to be hilarious or frightening. Either way, I had no choice. I said my goodbyes to my companions, and took a taxi back to the hostel. It took everything I had not to get sick on the way there, and I immediately told the hostel staff that I would be extending my stay. I spent most of the next 8 hours in the hostel bathroom. The time I spent outside of the bathroom was spent in my bed. I had become so dehydrated that I was beginning to have muscle cramps all over, so I decided that I had to go get something to drink. I bought some bread and lots of Gatorade, and then hurried back to my room. After another 3 hours of being sick, I finally started feeling better. Since my plans had been set back a day, I needed to go to an internet café to communicate with some friends in Puebla. The hills of Xalapa seemed like mountains, and no one seemed to know exactly where the café was—except that it was *arriba* (up the street). It was also raining again, but that no longer seemed to matter. I finally found the café, and updated my friends on my plans. Then, I was able to video chat with my girlfriend, who I think was wondering if she would ever see me alive again. For her sake, it probably would have been better if the computer had not had a web camera. We talked for over an hour, which helped me feel better, but my

stomach was beginning to act up again, so I had to let her go. During the 10-minute walk back to my room, I managed to throw up three times on the street—definitely the low point of my trip. I stopped by a pharmacy, got some different medicine, and went to sleep. The medicine worked, and I was able to get some much needed rest. I was glad that I had the chance to see the anthropology museum, but the rest of the day seemed like an epic failure.

1/6/2010

I awoke to someone opening the door to my room. A tall, British guy had just arrived to Xalapa, and I began speaking to him in Spanish, but he replied, “*No hablo español* (I don’t speak Spanish)”, with one of the thickest accents I had ever heard. I then talked to him in English for about an hour before leaving. I wished he would have gotten there a couple of days earlier, but I had to go. I told him everything that I had figured out in my short stay, telling him to avoid the *tacos al pastor* at the restaurant across from the cathedral. I checked out, this time for sure, and grabbed a taxi to the bus station. I still felt awful, but I had to continue my travels. Luckily, there was a bus route to Puebla that stopped in Perote, so I would be able to see two stops in one trip.

I took an economy bus, so it was a bit smaller than the buses I had been traveling on. When we left, though, the seats next to me were empty, so I had plenty of room to take a nap. I woke up as the bus stopped at the station in Perote. A young man sat down next to me, and we introduced ourselves. He was a college student from Guadalajara, and he was very curious about what I was doing in Perote. After explaining myself, he told me that the *Cofre de Perote*—the rock formation that I was hoping to see—was a cool landmark, but that the clouds were too

thick to see it that day. I was disappointed, but more worried about not throwing up on the bus—which did not have a bathroom. We talked for a while, and then I went back to napping. I arrived at the bus station in Puebla about two hours later. I met up with my friend, Arturo, whom I had met when I did my semester exchange in Monterrey. He was now working in Puebla, and he lived at home with his parents.

When Arturo picked me up, he was with his little brother, and a Japanese exchange student named Maki. We drove to his house, where I was greeted by his parents. They offered me some food, but my stomach was still upset, so I politely passed. After unpacking, we decided to go visit Cholula, one of the most significant stops on my trip. Cholula is home of the world's largest pyramid (by volume), but it looks like a natural hill. The Spanish built a church on top of it, and the view of the surrounding area was great. After walking around and checking out the view of the nearby volcanoes, we headed down to the main plaza. A lot of people were enjoying the day, and I had a good time with my friends. That evening, I still did not feel like eating, but I took a bite of my friend's *cemita* sandwich, which was delicious, but I did not want to push my luck, so that is all I ate. We returned to the house, and I fell asleep quickly, partly because of the high elevation, but mainly because I was still feeling sick and dehydrated. Although I still was not feeling well, the day was good, and I saw a lot of interesting things.

1/7/2010

Finally feeling better, I ate breakfast at Arturo's house, and then we decided to drive to Tlaxcala, another important stop on the route. Arturo, Maki, and I headed out, excited to see what Tlaxcala had to offer. On the way there, the police pulled us over. Arturo's car—an old

Ford Fiesta—apparently was not up to date on its emission level certification, or something along those lines, so he received a \$100 pollution ticket. Even though I felt bad for Arturo, I thought it was probably good that pollution legislation for the greater Mexico City area was actually being enforced—and without the usual bribe or *mordida*. We arrived to Tlaxcala in good time, and parked in the center of the city. None of us had ever been there, so we went to the office of tourism to see if there were any attractions related to the route of Cortés. Surprisingly, the employee barely seemed to know who Cortés was, telling us that there were no attractions of that kind in the city. We decided to get a second opinion, and found that there was, in fact, a museum exhibit about Cortés and the conquest. We entered the museum, which had a sign stating that admission was free for students. As soon as we started in, the museum employee told us that we had to pay. We showed our school identification cards, but he told us that they did not count since we were foreigners. After Maki pulled out her student visa, he finally allowed us to pass without paying. The museum itself was not very impressive, but the exhibit we came to see was quite interesting. We spent about an hour there, and then went to a small restaurant for lunch. After eating and talking for another hour or so, we drove back to Puebla, this time without police interference. Once back in Puebla, we decided to check out downtown Puebla. We ate dinner there, and then headed back to the house, which was rather chilly. We made plans for the next day, and then I headed to bed. The fact that I was finally completely over my sickness made it a wonderful day.

1/8/2010

I woke up cold again—which seemed to be a common theme during my travels. I thought Mexico would be a little bit warm, but I was wrong. The temperature fallen below freezing during the night, so the house was cold. Arturo's dad had a fire going downstairs, so we all gather by the fireplace. We ate breakfast, and then got ready for the day's excursion. We had decided to drive to the *Paso de Cortés* (Cortés's Pass), one of the highest mountain passes in Mexico. Even today, traveling through the mountains is difficult, generally requiring a 4-wheel-drive vehicle, so one can only image the difficulties Cortés and his men must have faced. We had decided to drive all the way to Amecameca, another stop on the route, and then we would turn around, taking the same route back to Puebla. Maki had to leave that morning, so we dropped her off at the bus station, and then Arturo, his parents, and I started our journey through the mountains. I was expecting a paved road, but it was actually just dirt with some stone-paved sections. We were in a jeep, but the road still presented problems. As soon as we starting climbing, it began to rain, and farther up it actually snowed. The road was slippery, and I thought that we were probably going to turn back, but Arturo's dad did not seem to be worried at all. His father, who does not speak English, put in his John Denver's greatest hits CD, and I held on for my dear life while he sang all the words to "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" with hardly any accent at all.

We arrived at the highest point of the pass after a long, bumpy ride. We walked around the busy visitor center. Everyone was coming to see the snow, which was falling pretty heavily. Arturo had never seen real snow before, so he was excited. We made a small snowman, and

everyone around was throwing snowballs. A news crew from Mexico City had come to film the snow, and they interviewed us. I am not sure, but there is a good chance that I was on the Mexico City news that evening. After playing in the snow for a while and taking in the view, we continued down the other side of the mountains, entering the State of Mexico. The view of the valley below—as well as the rapid change of surroundings as we descended—was amazing. For some reason, there was a police checkpoint on the way down, but we did not have any issues. We arrived at Amecameca about an hour later. The city was small, and it did not have anything relating to Cortés—but it was on the map I was following, so I thought it would be good to check it out. We grabbed some food to snack on, walked around for a while, and then headed back in the jeep. I was happy to have another chance to see all of the breathtaking views as we retraced our path back to Puebla. The trip took us about six hours in total, and we were all pretty worn out once we returned to the house. After a short rest, we all went to the local mall, ate dinner, and watched a movie. After the movie, I planned for my morning departure. Mexico City was the final stop on the route. I had been there before a couple years earlier, which made me realize how crazy the place was going to be. A solo trip there was a bit intimidating, but I was prepared.

1/9/2010

I woke up early, this time not so cold since I had extra blankets. I thanked Arturo and his family for all of their help, and then they dropped me off at the bus station. I was one of three passengers on the entire bus, which seemed strange to me, but I guess I was traveling at an odd hour. Mexico City is a traffic nightmare, and it was raining hard, but we almost made it to the

station without any problems. Just as I saw a road sign for the bus station, one of the bus's front tires blew out. The driver pulled the bus to the side of the road, and then we were asked to get off the bus and gather our luggage. This would not have been that big of a deal, but we were in Mexico City, so it was. It was raining, and we had nowhere to stand—as in no sidewalks or anything. The rain soaked us for about 10 minutes before we were able to board another bus. From that point, it only took us about five minutes to arrive at the station. I really wished that the tire could have held out a little longer.

Once at the bus station, I bought a ticket for the metro, which is the cheapest—and usually fastest—way to navigate the city. I was a little on edge after having to wait in the rain, and the fact that it was my first time traveling alone in Mexico City added to the feeling. I had decided to go directly to the church that housed Cortés's remains. After a short metro ride, I took the stairs up to the street, and then gathered my bearings. It was still raining, and in a hurry, I started walking down the right street, but in the wrong direction. I realized my mistake after about four blocks, turned around—passing barking street vendors for a second time—and arrived to the church, which was closed. I then walked to another nearby church to investigate further. A woman in that church told me that it was closed for renovations, and when I mentioned that I had come to see the remains of Cortés, she did not seem to know anything about them being there. I walked back to the church to see if there was another way in, got back on the metro, and headed to the *Zócalo*.

After a couple of metro transfers—and the necessary pushing and shoving—I arrived at the central plaza, which was housing the world's largest ice skating rink. The rain had picked up

again, so I walked directly to the hostel in which I had stayed during my last trip to Mexico City. I was not the only person with that idea. It was completely packed with rain-soaked foreigners. I purchased a ticket for 30 minutes of internet use to verify that I had actually reached the church that housed the remains of Cortés. I also arranged plans with some friends from Monterrey with whom I would be visiting shortly. After thinking about staying in the hostel long enough to dry off a bit, I realized that I was soaked through, so I headed back out into the rain to look around the plaza.

In both of my previous trips to Mexico City, I had taken a lot of time to look at the ruins of Tenochtitlán, so I passed by them quickly—this time knowing much more about them than I had during my previous visits. Then, I took the metro to the city's northern bus station, bought a ticket for Monterrey, and changed into dry clothes. I spent the hour before my departure thinking about the ups and downs of my trip, and looked forward to visiting with my friends in Monterrey. I had successfully followed the route of Cortés—to the best of my ability, and on a rather small budget. I retraced it almost 500 years after Cortés, and it was the most interesting and adventurous experience of my life. I visited with my friends in Monterrey for a day before taking a bus back to San Antonio, and then flew to Chicago. I arrived home without any major problems. Overall, the trip was amazing. I was exhausted, but it had been more than worthwhile. I learned a lot about Mexico, the conquest, and myself.

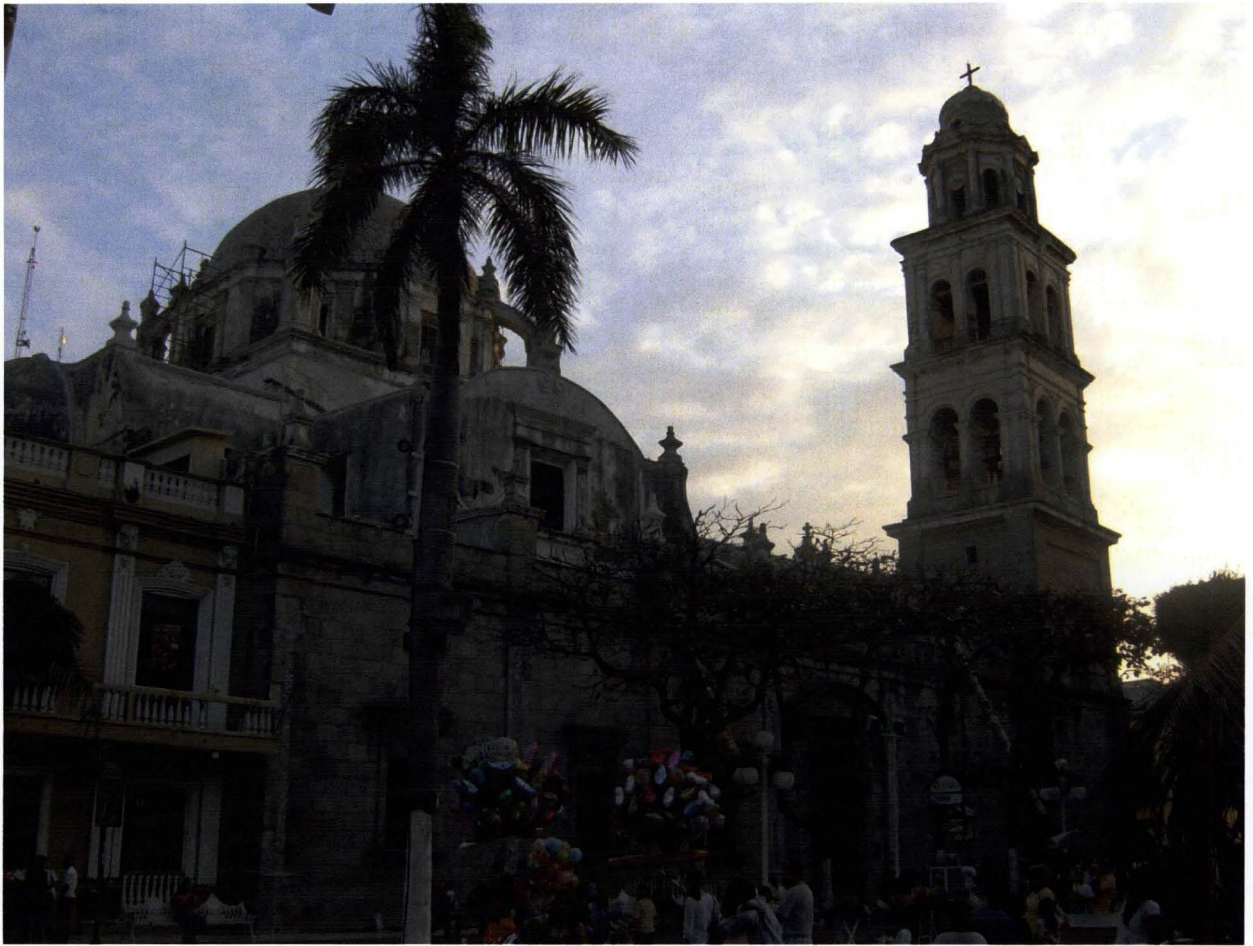
Photos
from
My Travels

Veracruz



500 Años, Veracruz, Encuentro de Dos Mundos

(500 Years, Veracruz, Encounter of Two Worlds)



Cathedral and Downtown



Isla de los Sacrificios
(Island of the Sacrifices)



El Malecón

(The Boardwalk with San Juan de Ulúa and Shipping Yard in Background)



View of Modern Veracruz from San Juan de Ulúa

La Antigua



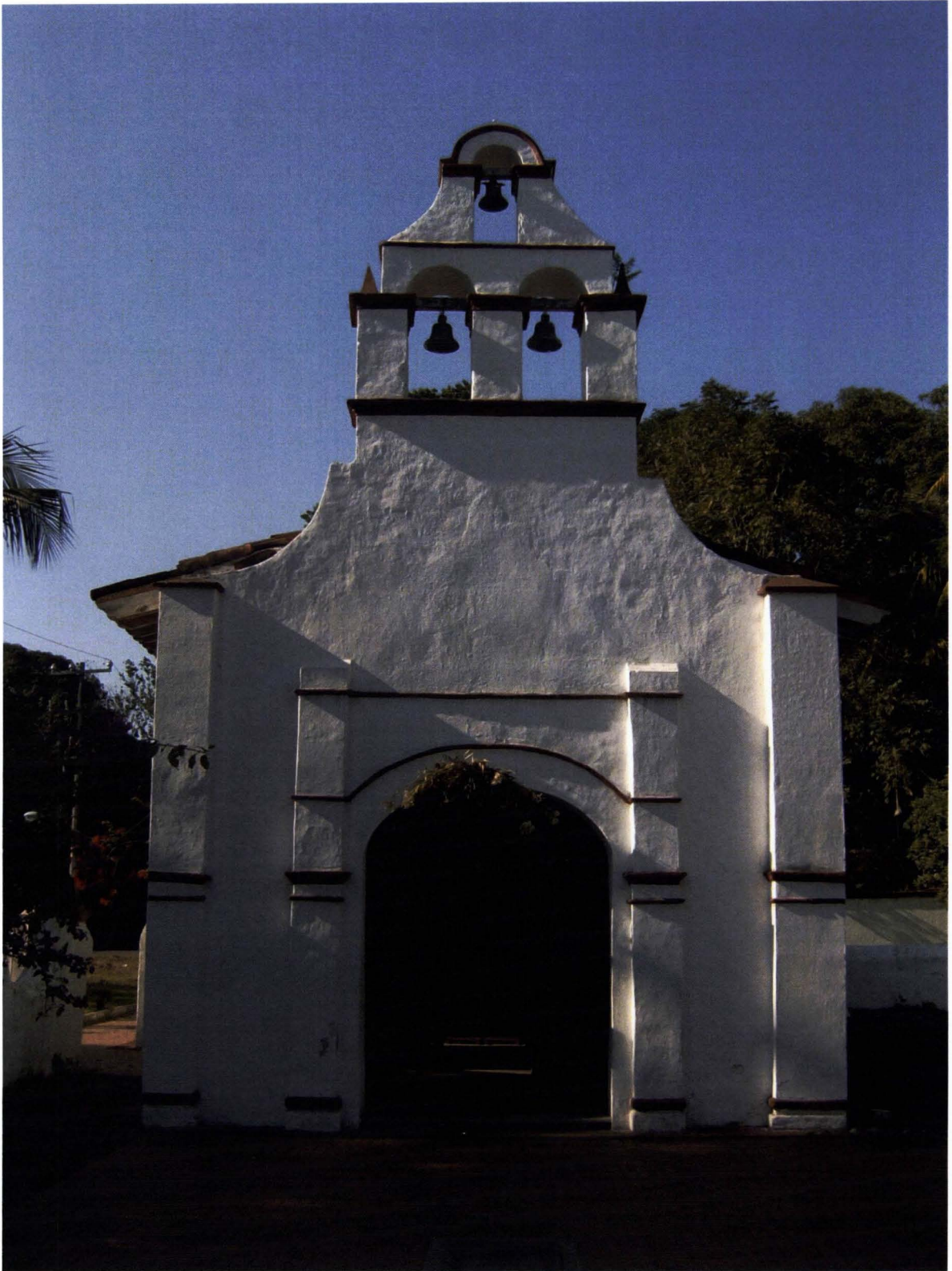
Bienvenidos a la Antigua Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, Primer Municipio en América

(Welcome to La Antigua, the First Town in America)



El Río La Antigua

(La Antigua River)



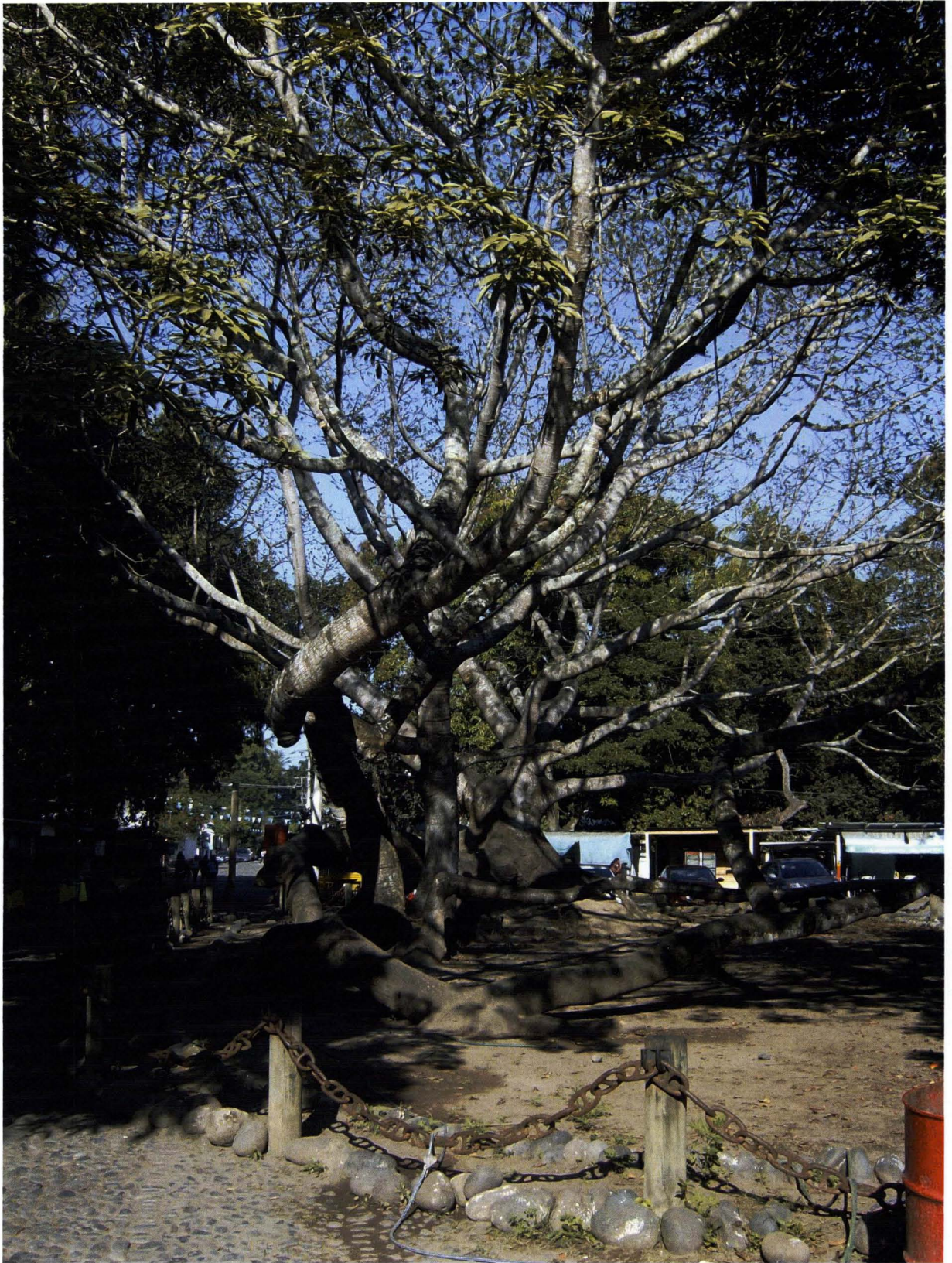
La Ermita del Rosario

(Chapel of the Rosary)



Casa de Cortés

(Spanish Customs Building)



***Ceiba* Tree to which Cortés Supposedly Tied His Ship**

Zempoala



Main Pyramid and Stone Ring with Sugar Cane Smoke in Background



View from Top of Main Pyramid

Quíahuíztlan



Ruins with Mountain in Background



View of Gulf of Mexico from Ruins



Traffic Jam

Xalapa



View of Outskirts from City Plaza



Hostal de la Niebla
(My 8-bunk Hostel Room)

Xalapa



Downtown